

The Essential Guide to **Disability Insurance** for Residents and Fellows





As a physician transitioning from residency or fellowship to practice, disability insurance is a crucial investment in your financial security. This guide will help you navigate the process of selecting and securing the right disability insurance policy, particularly as you prepare to begin your career as an attending. Securing a policy during your training often comes with significant benefits, including training program discounts that can save you more than \$10,000 over the course of your career.

Why Physicians in Training Need Disability Insurance

Physicians face unique risks when it comes to disability. Due to the high demands of the profession—both mentally and physically—a disabling injury or illness could prevent you from performing your medical duties, particularly in specialized fields like surgery or anesthesiology. In fact, statistics show that 1 in 4 physicians will experience a disability at some point in their careers.

Key Risks for Physicians:

- **High Stress & Long Hours:** The demanding nature of the medical profession increases the risk of burnout, fatigue, and stress-related illnesses, which can lead to long-term disabilities.
- **Repetitive Movements:** Physicians, especially in fields like surgery or orthopedics, often perform repetitive motions that can result in musculoskeletal disorders or injuries.
- **Fine Motor Skills:** Many specialties require precise hand movements; an injury or illness affecting dexterity could make it impossible to perform essential tasks.
- **Physical Demands:** Standing for extended periods, lifting, and other physical tasks increase the risk of injury.
- **Mental Health:** The emotional toll of patient care and high-pressure decision-making can contribute to mental health issues, which may lead to disability.

Action: Understand that disability insurance is essential for securing your income and protecting your family's financial future if you are unable to work due to a disability.

STEP 1:

Assess Your Need for Disability Insurance

Before selecting a disability insurance policy, it's important to evaluate your financial situation and determine how much coverage you will need.

Calculate Your Expenses

Begin by calculating your monthly and annual expenses. Consider essential costs such as:

- Housing: Mortgage or rent payments, property taxes, utilities
- Debt: Student loans, personal loans, car payments
- Living Expenses: Food, transportation, insurance, healthcare, childcare
- Savings Goals: Retirement contributions, education funds for children, investments

Once you have a clear picture of your financial obligations, consider your future goals, such as:

- Retirement Savings: Ensuring you can still save for retirement even if you're unable to work }
- Children's Education: Funding education expenses or other major life milestones

Employer-Provided Coverage

Many hospitals and medical groups offer some form of disability insurance as part of their benefits package. While employer-provided insurance can be a great starting point, it's essential to understand the limitations and whether it's sufficient for your needs.

Questions to Ask About Employer-Provided Coverage:

What percentage of your income does the policy cover?

Employer policies often cover only 50% to 60% of your salary (minus offsets like Social Security, Workers Comp or income earned in a different job), and this amount may be taxable. For most physicians, this is not enough to cover all their expenses.

Does it cover bonuses or other income?

If a significant portion of your compensation comes from bonuses, overtime, or other non-salary income, your employer's policy may not cover this.

How does it define disability?

Many employer policies require you to be unable to work in ANY job (even outside of medicine) to qualify for benefits.





Is the coverage portable?

Employer-sponsored disability insurance typically ends when you leave your job. If you change jobs or start your own practice, you'll need to secure your own coverage.

Should You Supplement Employer Coverage?

In many cases, the answer is yes. A supplemental policy can help close any gaps in coverage, ensuring that you're fully protected if a disability occurs. Supplemental policies are often customizable and allow you to extend your benefit period or increase your monthly payout.

Action: Calculate your monthly expenses and long-term financial goals. Ensure that your policy will replace 60%-70% of your pre-tax income, which should be sufficient to cover your essential living costs.



STEP 2: Understand Key Policy Features

Disability insurance policies vary in terms of coverage, features, and costs. For physicians, understanding these features is crucial to ensuring comprehensive protection.

Own-Occupation vs. Any-Occupation

One of the most important features for physicians to consider is the own-occupation clause.

- Own-Occupation: This type of policy pays benefits if you're unable to perform the duties of your specific occupation. The best policies will consider your medical specialty to be your occupation. For example, if you're a surgeon who can no longer operate due to a hand injury, you could still receive benefits even if you could work in a non-surgical role, such as teaching or consulting.

- Any-Occupation: With an any-occupation policy, you will only receive benefits if you are unable to work in any capacity. This offers less protection because you could be denied benefits if you can work in a lower-paying job outside of your specialty. This definition is often found in employer provided group disability insurance.

Action: Prioritize true own-occupation coverage to ensure you're fully protected if you can no longer perform your specific medical duties.

Elimination Period

The elimination period is the time you must wait after becoming disabled before you start receiving benefits. Common elimination periods are:

- 90 days (standard for most physicians)
- 180 days or 365 days (longer elimination periods reduce premiums but require more time without income before benefits begin)

Choose an elimination period based on how long you can sustain yourself with your savings or short-term disability benefits before long-term benefits kick in.



Benefit Period

The benefit period is the length of time benefits will be paid if you're disabled. Physicians typically opt for benefit periods that last until retirement age (65 or 67), as this provides protection throughout their entire working life. Shorter benefit periods, such as 5 or 10 years, may lower premiums but offer less long-term security.

Action: Select a policy with a benefit period extending to retirement age for long-term security.

Key Riders

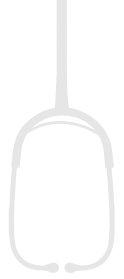
Disability insurance riders provide additional benefits and customization options. For physicians, some of the most important riders include:

- **Residual Disability Rider:** Provides benefits if you are partially disabled and experience a reduction in income, even if you're still able to work part-time.
- **Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) Rider:** Ensures that your benefits increase over time to keep up with inflation. This is particularly valuable for long-term disabilities.
- **Future Purchase Option (FPO) Rider:** Allows you to increase your coverage later on as your income grows, without needing additional medical underwriting. This is ideal for younger physicians whose income will increase significantly over time.
- **Student Loan Protection Rider:** Covers student loan payments if you become disabled, which is particularly useful for early-career physicians who still carry significant student debt.

Action: Choose the riders that make sense for your financial situation. Residual disability and COLA riders are particularly valuable, and the Future Purchase Option rider is essential for ensuring your coverage keeps pace with income growth.

STEP 3: Take Advantage of Training Program Discounts

As a physician in training, you have access to special discounts on disability insurance policies that can save you more than \$10,000 over your career. Many insurers offer exclusive discounts to residents and fellows, allowing you to lock in lower rates before transitioning to attending status.



Why It's Important to Buy During Residency or Fellowship

- **Lower Rates:** Premiums are based on age and health, so purchasing a policy early in your career locks in lower rates.
- **Discounts:** Many training program discounts are only available to residents and fellows, and they can significantly reduce the cost of your premiums.
- **Health Lock-In:** By purchasing now, you secure coverage based on your current health, even if you develop medical issues later in life.

Action: Take advantage of training program discounts to save significantly on premiums and lock in your current health status. Securing coverage now will save you money and provide peace of mind as you advance in your career.

STEP 4: Research and Compare Providers

Work with a Broker

An independent insurance broker can help you gather quotes from multiple providers and guide you through the comparison process. Brokers have access to a wide range of policies and can often find physician-specific discounts that may not be available through direct inquiries.

Here's what to consider when comparing quotes:

- **Benefit Amount:** Ensure the policy replaces enough of your income to cover your living expenses.
- **Elimination Period:** Confirm the elimination period aligns with your financial situation.
- **Riders:** Check for critical riders like residual disability, COLA, and FPO.

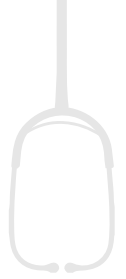
Financial Strength of Providers

It's important to choose an insurer with strong financial ratings (A+ or higher) from agencies like AM Best or Standard & Poor's. This ensures the company will be able to pay out claims in the long run.

Action: Obtain quotes from multiple insurers and compare them based on the level of coverage, benefit periods, elimination periods, and riders. Work with a broker to access physician-specific discounts and ensure you're getting the best value.



STEP 5: Finalize Your Policy



Once you've selected the best policy for your needs, it's time to finalize the process and activate your coverage.

Complete the Application

The application process typically involves:

- **Personal and Financial Information:** You'll need to provide details about your income, occupation, and medical history.
- **Medical Exam:** Depending on your age and the benefit amount you are applying for, insurers may require a medical exam to assess your health. The results of this exam will impact the final terms of your policy, including the premium.
- **Underwriting Process:** The insurer will assess your risk based on factors such as your health, occupation, age, occupation and income. This process may result in standard approval, modified terms (such as higher premiums or exclusions), or, in some cases, a declined application.

Action: Complete your application, schedule your medical exam (if needed), and review the final policy for accuracy. Once approved, set up premium payments to keep the policy active.

STEP 6: Maintain and Update Your Policy

Your disability insurance policy should evolve alongside your career and financial situation. Regularly reviewing and updating your policy will ensure that your coverage remains adequate over time.

Annual Reviews

Conduct a review of your policy at least once a year, or after significant life events such as:

- A salary increase or career advancement
- Marriage, the birth of a child, or a change in financial obligations
- The purchase of a home or other major assets

During your review, ensure that your coverage matches your current income and financial needs. If your income has increased significantly, you may need to increase your coverage to avoid a gap.





Life Changes

Major life events—such as getting married, having children, or taking on significant new debt—may increase your financial responsibilities. Adjust your coverage accordingly to ensure that your family and assets are fully protected in the event of a disability.

Action: Set an annual reminder to review your policy. Use your Future Purchase Option rider as your income increases, and adjust your benefit amount to account for new financial responsibilities.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Take Advantage of Discounts:

As a physician in training, you have access to discounts that can save you over \$10,000 on disability insurance premiums throughout your career. Buy early to secure lower rates and lock in your health status.

Work with a Broker:

Compare policies and use an independent broker to access exclusive physician discounts.

Understand Key Features

Choose a true own-occupation policy with a benefit period that extends to retirement and add riders like residual disability, COLA, and FPO to protect your growing income.

Regularly Review and Update Your Policy:

As your income and financial responsibilities increase, use the Future Purchase Option to grow your coverage and keep pace with your career.

By following this guide, you'll secure comprehensive disability insurance that provides vital protection for your income and financial future. Regularly reviewing and updating your policy will ensure that it continues to meet your evolving needs as you transition from training to full-time practice as an attending physician.



FAQS: Disability Insurance for Physicians

1. Why do physicians need disability insurance?

Physicians invest years in education and training, and their ability to earn an income is one of their most valuable financial assets. Disability insurance protects this income in case illness or injury prevents them from working, ensuring they can continue meeting financial obligations such as student loans, mortgages, and family expenses.

2. What are the benefits of buying disability insurance while in training?

- **Discounts:** Many residents and fellows qualify for exclusive discounts. The average physician saves more than \$10,000 in premiums over their career by purchasing a policy during training.
- **Health Lock-In:** Once you purchase a policy, your health is locked in. Even if you develop health issues later, your coverage remains intact without any changes to your premiums.
- **Future Increases may not require medical underwriting:** With a Future Purchase Option rider, you can increase your coverage as your income grows, without needing medical underwriting. This means any future health changes won't impact your ability to upgrade your policy.
- **Simplified Underwriting:** The process is often more streamlined for residents and fellows, with no medical exam required and limited financial underwriting, making it easier to secure coverage quickly.

3. What riders should I consider adding to my disability insurance policy?

Physicians should consider important riders such as:

- **Residual/Partial Disability Rider:** Pays benefits if you're partially disabled and lose some income.
- **Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) Rider:** Increases your benefits over time to keep up with inflation.

- **Future Purchase Option (FPO) Rider:** Allows you to increase your coverage in the future without additional medical underwriting.
- **Student Loan Protection Rider:** Covers your student loan payments if you become disabled

4. How much does disability insurance cost for physicians?

The cost varies based on factors such as your age, medical specialty, health, and the amount of coverage you choose. Premiums can range from 1% to 3% of your annual salary. Premiums are typically lower if you apply early in your career while you are younger and healthier.

5. What factors affect my disability insurance premiums?

Several factors influence premiums, including:

- **Age:** Younger applicants pay lower premiums.
- **Health:** Better health reduces premiums, while pre-existing conditions can increase costs.
- **Specialty:** Higher-risk specialties like surgery or anesthesiology may lead to higher premiums.
- **Gender:** Women often face higher premiums due to higher rates of claims.
- **Benefit Period:** Longer benefit periods result in higher premiums.
- **Elimination Period:** Longer elimination periods (e.g., 90 days or more) reduce premiums.



6. When should I purchase disability insurance?

The best time to purchase disability insurance is early in your career, ideally during residency or right after. Younger and healthier applicants qualify for lower premiums, and you can lock in favorable rates before any health issues arise that might make coverage more expensive or harder to obtain.

7. How do I shop around for disability insurance?

Start by getting quotes from multiple providers, either directly or through an independent insurance broker. Compare key policy features like own-occupation coverage, elimination and benefit periods, and riders. Be sure to factor in any discounts for physicians, such as those from medical associations or residency programs.

8. Do I pay more if I buy disability insurance through a broker?

No, you do not pay more when buying disability insurance through a broker. Insurance premiums are set by the insurance companies, and they are the same whether you buy directly from the company or through a broker. In fact, working with a broker can help you access multiple options, compare policies side by side, and potentially secure exclusive discounts—especially for physicians in training—without any extra cost to you. Brokers are there to help you find the best coverage at the most competitive price.

9. What happens if I change jobs or switch employers?

If you have an individual disability insurance policy, it is portable, meaning it stays with you even if you change jobs or leave your employer. However, group disability insurance provided by your employer is usually not portable, so it's crucial to secure individual coverage that you can maintain throughout your career.

10. Do I need disability insurance if my employer provides it?

Employer-provided disability insurance is often insufficient for physicians. It may only cover a portion of your salary (e.g., 40-50% after offsets) and might not include own-occupation coverage. It's a good idea to supplement employer-provided coverage with an individual policy that offers more comprehensive protection.

11. What happens if I become partially disabled?

If you are partially disabled and can still work in a limited capacity, a residual disability rider will allow you to receive benefits to compensate for lost income. This rider is essential for physicians who may not be able to fully perform their duties but can still earn some income.

12. Can I increase my coverage in the future?

Yes, as your income grows, you can increase your coverage. If you include a Future Purchase Option (FPO) rider, you can increase your coverage without needing to undergo further medical underwriting. This is especially helpful early in your career when your income is lower but likely to increase significantly over time.



13. Can I cancel my disability insurance policy?

Yes, you can cancel your disability insurance policy at any time by contacting your insurer and stopping premium payments. However, it's important to consider the long-term consequences, especially since reapplying for coverage later could result in higher premiums or difficulty securing coverage if your health has changed.

14. Is disability insurance tax-deductible?

Disability insurance premiums are typically not tax-deductible for individual policies. However, the benefits you receive are usually tax-free, which means the money you receive in the event of a disability won't be subject to income taxes. Consult with a tax advisor for more specific information related to your circumstances.





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